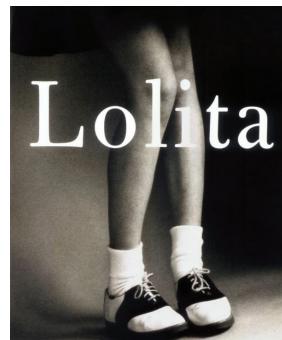




Life



INSIDE

LOOKING BACK ON A
SENSUAL SENSATION

• ENVIRONMENT • PHILOSOPHY • HEROES • SCIENCE • TRAVEL • PARANORMAL • SPORTS

I DON'T WANT TO GO TO
SCHOOL! I HATE SCHOOL!
I'D RATHER DO ANYTHING
THAN GO TO SCHOOL!



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A Child's Cry for Independence!

Calvin's a pest, but you've got to give it to him – he's one hell of a smart pest. Then why does he, as do children across nationalities and age groups, find school such a struggle? Surely, with such pandemic antipathy, the problem must lie not with the child, but the school. Indira Parthasarathy wonders if the best days of one's life could be better...



★ **Y**our father went to school – 1st grade through twelfth (or PUC). You did too. And your child's at it. Education has come to be a case of Pavlovian conditioning. It is like a collective conditioned reflex of the society to a five year old child – *pack him off to school*. More conditioning follows – to the sound of bells (incidentally as in Pavlov's experiments too), silos in uniforms prepare to hoard in millions of facts to do with trigonometry, Allied Powers, Maugham, electrons, tendons, America and so on. At the end of the day, there are produced greater crammers and lesser crammers. Has anyone noticed? Perhaps.

Democracy in education is a global revolution silently sweeping across academic circles. That is, however, not to suggest latter-day genesis. Mooted in the times of Plato and Rousseau and later by Rabindranath Tagore and J Krishnamurthy in India, John Dewey (Democracy and Education, 1916) in United States, A S Neill (Summerhill, see box) in Britain, education is waiting to be liberated from the rigmarole of rote.

From the recently concluded EUDEC 2008 (European Democratic Education Community – the official German

project for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development for 2005-2014) Conference, ex-Summerhillian Tomo Usuda, photographer and active advocate of freedom in schools wrote to TSI, "Numerous workshops on diverse models on democratic education and arguments to support the idea took place... the level of enthusiasm was stunning... I believe it will further influence the education sector globally – not only because I grew up at Summerhill, but because it is a rational and practical model for kids." The 'model' he alludes to is one where children's participation in the process of learning is a function of freedom. Founder of Vidya Mandir School in Chennai, and Child Development & Education expert, Dr S Anandalakshmy explains, "The ultimate freedom is to pursue the subjects one likes and to develop skills and abilities for which one has a natural inclination. Apart from 'what,' the choice of 'when' is important. In the conventional school system, we put children of a narrow chronological age range and then ex-

pect them to be similar in everything... we can best serve children when we allow their inherent diversity to be recognized and supported."

Vikasana is serving well, then. Founded by Malathi in 1980 and situated just off the Bangalore city limits, Vikasana is developed on the lines of Neel Bagh School established by her mentor David Horsburgh. With no compulsion of exams, children at Vikasana not only learn the

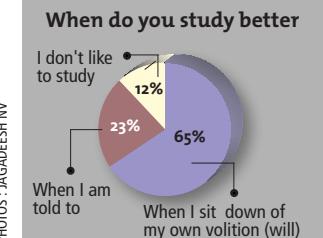
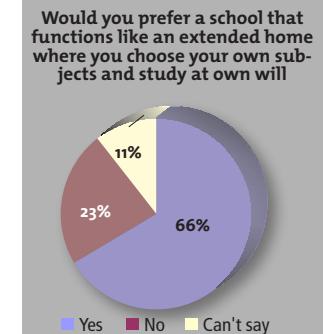
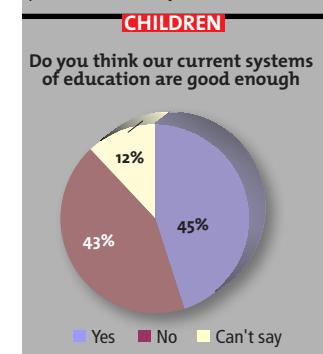
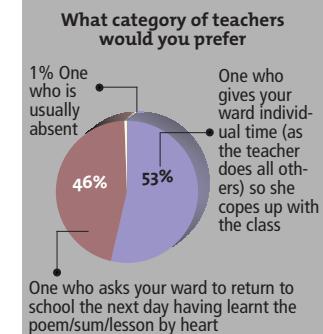
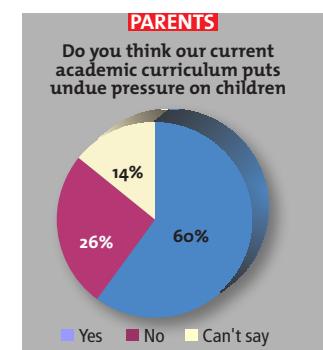
three Rs, but also work on handicrafts, painting, pottery etc. As the kids broke for lunch, Malathi recalled, "After having taught at J Krishnamurthy's Rishi Valley

School in Andhra Pradesh, he set up Neel Bagh (70 miles from Vikasana's location) to replicate the ideals of libertarian education with the not-so-privileged. And the results were marvelous – can you imagine 1st generation learners in the villages singing Beethoven and Mozart, and making maps?!"

Can self-accountability make so much difference to children's motivations? Here's some evidence and inputs that seem to suggest it is indeed so... [TSI](#)

Education is waiting to be liberated from the rigmarole of rote.

Malathi attends to her students in Vikasana





Summerhill Meeting in progress; (below) A S Neill

SUMMERHILL

It's a breezy name for a school. It's no less balmy inside, and not just for its idyllic Victorian settings in Leiston, a couple of miles off the luscious Suffolk county coastline. For, students at Summerhill are free to take their classes at will. Or not.

Summerhill, which moved to its current site in 1927, was constructed out of the vision of A S Neill, a liberal Scotsman who believed that adults have no right to think they know best, and impose their decisions on children in the name of knowledge and discipline. An iconoclastic institution for its times, it continues to stand out by way of its unique democratic structure of academics and administration.

At Summerhill, children don't have to file in for their morning classes; they may start their day with skateboarding. They address teachers by their first names, even nicknames. Meetings are not presided over by teachers; matters are decided mutually as children and adults have an equal vote. Effectively, children lead the proceedings, greater in number than they are. It does not however imply children on a rampage – there are laws for this self-governing com-



munity, so the school lives by "freedom, not license" as Neill had put it. Neill's daughter, and current principal, Mrs Zoe Readhead told TSI, "Neill was a practical man who just got on with the job of giving children a place to be free and be themselves. He hated any kind of compulsion for children."

The progressive character of the school has irked the purists often and things, in fact, came to a head when OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education), the land's education inspectorate, denounced the institution for its ways in a report following inspection in 1999, even threatening closure. But Zoe and her husband Tony Readhead – with support from educationists, parents and children – defended it all the way to the Royal Courts of Justice in London, where the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) preferred peace in an agreement which – and this only gets

better – was ratified by children's vote in the Court! Latest OFSTED reports (2007) have given them a clean chit.

An ex-Summerhillian recalls...

Danë Goodsman, B.Ed (Hons) Ph.D. Senior Lecturer in Medical Education, Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry, Queen Mary University of London is a second generation Summerhillian. Her children daughter attended from 1990 – 1998; her son, 2001 – 2004. Her mother was a student during 1937 – 1948 and her step-father also attended the school "sometime from the 1920s on".

How do you remember A S Neill?

By the time I was at Summerhill Neill was no longer teaching, but he always attended the meetings. He was 80 in my first year, but he was still mending beds and working in his workshop throughout the time I was at school. One thing he did run in the evening sometimes was 'spontaneous acting', where you are given a scenario and you have to come up with a mini-drama to fit it. One I remember Neill set was where he was himself and one of us kids, a prospective parent.

At Summerhill, how is a student warranted to academically equip herself well

for the rigours of competition outside?

The problem we Summerhillians have with your question is this is how people who don't go to Summerhill view learning. Because we know (and Summerhill has proved over more than 80 years), that if you give children the chance to make their decisions they will make good ones. And any that they make which are poor they will also learn from. So not to be forced to attend lessons does not result, as you suggest, in kids not going to lessons, instead it means that kids choose to go when they are ready and when they are, they are completely committed to learning.

At the meetings, I imagine, children are required to behave "like adults". Isn't it asking too much of the spirit of childhood?

Children at Summerhill behave like the people that they are – they are not viewed 'like adults' – they are simply allowed to express themselves in the way they feel comfortable. A notion such as the 'free-wheeling spirit of childhood' mostly results from the understanding of childhood that has children living in a world that may, if they are deserving, allow them 'freedom from', rarely, except in Summerhill, are they allowed 'freedom to'. 

★ “This brutality must end”

Arvind Gupta is a National Award for Science Popularisation amongst Children awardee and has digitised for free over 1,000 books on children, toys and education)

- Are our prevailing education systems inadequate or inequitous? If so, how?

The school as an institution has perhaps outlived its purpose. It has been indicted on many scores – it segregates children of the same age group (often class and sex too) and exposes them to a single adult. The rituals of the school – prayer, gong, assembly, attendance, uniform, text-books, and rote learning, all go against natural learning. In real life everyone is simultaneously a learner and a teacher. “Danger! School” – a cartoon book published in the 1970’s by Paulo Friere’s

Institute for Cultural Action (IDAC) is a devastating critique of schools.

- If learning – its pace and content – is left to the child, would she still be qualified enough for college?

Left to their own devices children learn faster, better and more useful things. Children engage in things they love best. At some point they also realise that it would be good for them to get a college degree and then they work with gusto and do make it to good colleges. Today, the IIT coaching industry alone is pegged at Rs 10,000 crore. These shops bludgeon the children’s intelligence and creativity with the connivance of their parents. This is insane. This brutality must



end. Most adults want to live their own failed aspirations through their children. Once the need comes from within, children will crack the toughest of tests.

The best parents can strive is to give their children a happy childhood – a wellspring which will keep the children in good stead as adults. Happy people seldom kill or maim others in the name of religion, caste, patriotism.

• According to David Gribble, Neelbagh “has completely lost its original inspiration”. Given this concern, are we doing enough on the alternative education front? I had the opportunity to visit Neelbagh on several occasions. It was perhaps the single most creative school which I ever saw. A child could be studying third standard English, fifth standard

Maths and seventh standard Telugu at the same time. David had an abiding interest in philosophy and theatre which he rubbed on the children.

Many of these children from poor village homes made it to engineering and medical colleges. David had a very rich personal library with over 7000 books. Now the place is a rehabilitation centre for children run by an NGO. The state is run by the ruling elite who have paid lip service to ‘democratic’ education. The municipal and state run schools are in bad shape. But there are some signs of hope with the new NCERT textbooks. They are engaging, contextual, attractively printed, written by some of the best people in the country and low-priced. As textbooks are the only books most of our children ever get to read, hence this initiative will go a long way. **ES**

Why Democratic Education is Important

By David Gribble

(David Gribble is the Co-ordinator of the International Democratic Education Network and author of *Real Education: Varieties of Freedom and A Really Good School*.)

Democracy is accepted almost everywhere as the best system for national government, but democracy in schools has, up to now, generally been regarded as an absurdity. This misconception is based on two mistaken ideas: firstly, that only adults know what children need to learn in order to become responsible members of society, and secondly, that children don’t want to learn it.

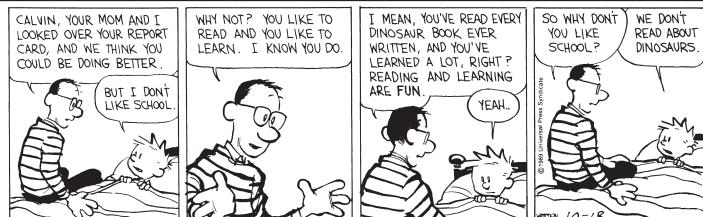
The result is an authoritarian system that all too often destroys a child’s enthusiasm for learning and wastes years in learning information that

most forget as soon as the exams are over. The first few months after a period of repression in a conventional school may be over-exuberant, but when children realise that they’re responsible for their own lives, they make responsible decisions.

There is no one model of democratic school that is accepted as ideal. Summerhill has lessons, rules and punishments, but lessons are voluntary and the rules and punishments are decided by the school meeting of staff and students. Sudbury Valley School in the USA has no lessons, but a detailed system of rules and punishments. Sands School in the UK runs a fairly ordinary timetable, but keeps rules to a minimum and gen-

erally tries to avoid punishment altogether. Tokyo Shure has a timetable of lessons that is regularly changed, according to the children’s requests, but there is no obligation to come into school at all. What all these places have in common is a respect for the individual child, and an atmosphere in which children and adults work together as equals.

I have seen examples of democratic education in many different countries, but Butterflies (Project for street and working children in Delhi; founder, Rita Panicker) was one that impressed me most of all. At Moo Baan Dek, the children’s village in Thai-



land for orphans and victims of abuse, newcomers are only expected to begin attending lessons after they have played and swum and enjoyed other therapeutic activities for up to three years.

This illustrates the most important argument in favour of adopting democratic education on a national scale. For well-adjusted children from the liberal middle classes it is enjoyable and appropriate, but to the rejected, the down-trodden, it offers redemption.

(The 16th International Democratic Conference 2008 is to be held from August 11 to August 18 2008 in Vancouver, Canada) **ES**